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Procedia Economics and Finance 24 (2015) 41 – 49

Procedia
Economics and Finance

www.elsevier.com/locate/procedia

International Conference on Applied Economics, ICOAE 2015, 2-4 July 2015, Kazan, Russia

Economic recession, austerity and gender inequality at work. Evidence from Greece and other Balkan countries.

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Abstract

Historically, a gender pay gap in participation, employment and earnings of women is exhibited all over the world. The pay gap issue and employment of women may vary across countries, economies and cultures. In the current work, we present some data of gender inequality at work and the possible contributing factors to this persisting phenomenon. The recent global financial crisis and austerity measures may have resulted in increased gender inequality at work and put a pressure for women to work for less or enter professions with lower earnings. The data indicate that internationally, progress in gender equality at work is stalled during recession. This is particularly important for the Balkan countries which have exhibited some progress in gender equality at work over the past years but was stalled during the recent global economic recession.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of ICOAE 2015.

Keywords: Gender inequality, Balkan economies, Greece, recession, employment

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1. Introduction

1.1. Setting the Agenda: The issue of gender equality in labour market.

Economy and societies in general can benefit by offering indiscriminate access to education and employment to men and women.

Gender equality in labour market is a multidimensional issue including labour force participation, employment, earnings, and job quality in terms of benefits, rights, opportunities for skills development (OECD, 2012; World Bank Group, 2013). It is a vital issue of economic and social development since societies that discriminate have negative effect in their country's economic growth, loss of talent and a lower overall quality of life (World Bank Policy Research Report, 2011). GDP per capita losses attributable to gender gaps in the labour market have been estimated at up to 27 percent in certain regions (Cuberes and Teignier, 2012).

Research at an international level suggests that companies with a high representation of women at the most senior levels deliver stronger organisational and financial performance and better corporate governance (Catalyst, 2010; Ernst and Young, 2010).

Nevertheless and despite the introduction and enactment of *Laws* and *Directives* which govern the provision of equal opportunities at work and the establishment of a general framework for the equal treatment and accessibility in employment and occupation, the phenomenon of gender inequality at work continues to be a longstanding issue seen in various areas (Anastasiou and Siassiakos, 2014).

In spite of the large percentage of women's participation at work and their high level of education, there are still inequalities between male and female employees in terms of *gender wage gaps*, career, earning, political empowerment, participation in managerial and higher levels decision-making positions (European Commission, 2013a).

Governments may even attempt to "encourage" women to study for a particular subject and enter a "male" dominant profession but even then women may earn less than men for their work. Internationally, women are overrepresented in sectors that are characterized by "low" status and pay (ILO, 2010), while on average, women spend twice as much time than men on household responsibilities and four times as much time on childcare (Duflo, 2012).

The 2008 global financial crisis, had as a result in governments using reserves and increasing borrowing to support their financial sectors, increasing sovereign debts and unemployment.

With lower revenues, governments started to reduce spending by cutting public services, benefits and public sector jobs (ILO, 2012). These measures had a major impact mainly on female workers, in both the public and private sectors, in various ways (Lethbridge, 2012): since women are the majority among public sector employees they have lost more jobs, there has been a reduction in exports' demand from developing countries in sectors where most workers are female, the gender pay gap has widened, wage freezes and cuts have reduced the incomes and mobility of women who were already among the lowest paid, more and more women are working in insecure jobs with long hours, low pay, and poor working conditions to support their family income.

The crisis had a severe impact on the socioeconomic parameters. Its impact on growth, employment and income has led to long-term wage and monetary benefits cuts, an increase in the number of working hours and a dramatic increase in unemployment. This may have resulted in increased gender inequality at work and may have put a greater pressure on women to work for *less* or enter professions with lower earnings.

So far, no country in the world has achieved *gender equality* (Hausmann et al, 2012).

In the present work, we review the current trends in gender (in)equality at work and the possible contributing factors to the persisting international phenomenon with particular reference to Greece amidst the ongoing fierce economic crisis.

1.2. Gender inequality at work phenomenon: the gender pay gap, participation gap, remuneration gap and advancement gap

Gender inequality refers to “unequal treatment” or perceptions of individuals based on their gender and arises *biologically* (through chromosomes or brain structure, for example) or from differences in *socially* constructed gender roles (Wood, 2005).

There are several parameters which can be used to estimate gender inequality. One such indicator is the *gender pay gap* (GPG). The gender pay gap, is a complex issue caused by a variety of interrelated factors such as: gender roles, direct / indirect discrimination at work, workplace practices (access to promotion opportunities and training, for example), female under-represented in politics and economy, the structure of pay systems that may result in different rates of pay for female and male employees, the sector and form of employment; in the health and social work sector women make up the overwhelming majority of all workers while women tend to work part – shorter hours in jobs that are compatible with their family responsibilities, domestic and care work. The *gender pay gap* tends to get wider in women with children and when they work part-time. In 2010, for example, the employment rate for women with children was 64.7% compared with 89.7% for men with children (European Commission, 2012).

GPG has been characterized as a permanent and globally persisting phenomenon (ILO, 2010) and although it may vary across countries, economies and cultures historically, a *gender pay gap* in participation, employment and earnings of women is exhibited all over the world and is reflected in several parameters including: choice of degree subject, career, earnings and participation in managerial positions.

Basically, the *gender pay gap* measures the earning differences between women and men in paid employment (European Commission, 2013a), caused by various interrelated factors, despite the fact that over time occupations, industries, work responsibilities and skills of men and women have become more similar. It is divided into “explained” and “unexplained” components (Blinder, 1973; Oaxaca, 1973).

The “explained” gender wage gap refers to the difference in wage earnings that can be explained by observable characteristics such as: educational level, work experience, length of employment, occupation, etc.

On the other side, the “unexplained” part of the gender pay gap is interpreted as *discrimination* since the wage differential between men and women can not be explained by observable variables.

Gender pay gaps are particularly evident in the Middle East and North Africa, but also persist in high-income OECD countries (World Bank Group, 2013). The average difference between male and female earnings is more than 15% and exceeds 20% in several countries.

The GPG varies across Europe from below 10% to 30%. In 2013, it was below 10 % in Slovenia, Poland, Italy, Luxembourg and Romania and wider than 20 % in Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Finland and Greece (European Commission, 2013a).

It can be seen in all countries irrespective of their *Gross National Income* (GNI), revealing that *gender pay gap* and *gender equality* is an issue viewed both in wealthier and poorer countries. In practice, the impact of the gender pay gap means that women earn less over their lifetimes resulting in lower pensions and a higher risk of poverty. In 2011, for example, it was estimated that 23 % of women over 65 were at risk of poverty, compared to 17 % of men of the same age (Eurostat, 2011).

Internationally, gender differences can be viewed not only regarding wage disparities but in other areas such as: economic participation and opportunity (*participation gap*, *remuneration gap*, *advancement gap*), educational attainment (ratios of women to men in primary, secondary, tertiary-level education), *political empowerment* (highest levels of political decision-making through the ratio of women to men in minister-level and parliamentary positions, health and survival - life expectancy and sex ratio (Hausmann et al, 2012).

Glass ceiling is a specific type of gender inequality, in terms of existing invisible or artificial barriers which prevent women from advancing within their work and limited chances for receiving promotions and income raises (Cotter et al, 2001; Anastasiou and Papakostantinou, 2011).

Internationally, women continue to be under-represented in higher levels decision-making positions, despite the fact that they make up nearly half the workforce and more than half of new university graduates in the European Union. On average, only one in four members of national parliaments and ministers of national governments in the European Union is a woman (European Commission, 2013b).

Female representation in senior positions and in entrepreneurship remains low till today. In 2012, for example, only about 20 percent of national parliamentary seats worldwide were held by women politicians - who usually hold ministries with a socio-cultural focus (OECD, 2012).

So far, no country in the world has achieved *gender equality* (Hausmann et al, 2012).

2. The issue of *gender inequality* at work in Greece and the economic crisis

Internationally, progress in gender equality at work is stalled or even increased during recession worsening economic conditions, deteriorating even more the position of women at work (World Bank 2011; Kazandziska et al, 2012).

This is particularly important for the Balkan countries which have exhibited some progress in gender equality at work over the past years that was stalled during the recent global economic recession.

In Greece, the size of the economy declined by over 23 per cent in 2007–2013, while the unemployment rate went up by as many as 19 ppts. At the same time, there have been reductions in the country's social expenditure, contracticting the notion that in periods of a crisis in countries that are deep in recession, social benefits may act as 'social stabilisers' (Salgado et al, 2014).

The economic recession and the country's fierce austerity measures have had a negative impact on both male and female participation and employment. Initially, the crisis affected more male employment but gradually, women's employment has been negatively affected as well.

Depression has been much deeper than expected, inducing a sharp rise in unemployment, especially for the young and women, which has risen more than 27% of the labour force at mid-2013 (OECD, 2013).

Since 2010, the percentage of female employment in Greece has dropped, from 49 per cent to 41.5 per cent. In late 2011, 67.4 per cent of Greek young women (between 15-19 years of age) were unemployed – an almost 40 per cent increase since 2008 – compared with 44.5 per cent of young men in the same age group.

At the end of 2012, the highest unemployment rates were 48.2% for young women (between 20 –29 years of age) as against 39.2 % for men of the same age (G.S.G.E., 2012).

In the EU, Greece has the largest female unemployment and the most important gap between female and male unemployment (Tudora et al, 2015).

Since the beginning of the crisis, male employment has decreased largely due to the fact that traditionally male jobs such as construction and manufacturing have been hit hard (Woestman, 2012). At the same time wages have dropped by more than 40%.

The significant fall in median incomes has been the characteristic of the so called *Great Recession*: between 2009–2013 the estimated fall was –36 per cent in real terms in Greece (compared to substantial –14 per cent in Portugal, –11 per cent in Spain and –6 per cent in Italy), with estimated relative poverty levels moving up steadily in Greece, being 3.3 ppts higher in 2013 than in 2009 (Matsaganis and Leventi, 2014). The proportion of the Greek population with incomes in 2013 below the 2009 poverty line (in real terms) was over 45 per cent, meaning a dramatic increase by more than 25 ppts compared to Portugal (+6.3 ppts), Spain (+4.5 ppts) and Italy (+3.0 ppts).

The current crisis in Greece seems to have changed the composition of the population in poverty affecting more women and the younger; a shift in poverty from the elderly to the young – who are placed at the bottom of the income distribution - and more likely to be unemployed or on low pay (Koutsogergopoulou et al, 2014).

Among European countries, Greece has the highest proportions of the young unemployed that have been without work for more than a year with the 25-29 age group experiencing the largest fall in the employment between 2005 and 2012 with a larger proportion of this age group being unemployed or inactive (Bell and Blanchflower, 2015).

Female activity rates and employment are consistently lower and unemployment rates higher for females than for males in the Greek labour market.

In Greece, gender differentials in are more marked than in many other EU states. In countries that underwent the most significant fiscal consolidation, like Greece Ireland and Spain, long-term wage and monetary benefits cuts, had a disproportionate impact on women (Tsiganou, 2014).

Although the unemployment gender gap has narrowed over the past years, the employment rates of older women and the unemployment rates of younger women in Greece have increased (Kambouri, 2013) where unemployment is currently almost trippled the EU average, with women exhibiting high percentages of unemployment (Filippidis et al, 2014). In 2012, for example, young female unemployment rates counted for 61% for the 20-24 years of age and 40% for the 25-29 age group compared to 47% and 35% for men respectively (Bell and Blanchflower, 2015).

As we can see in Figures 1a & b., in contrast to other Balkan countries, total unemployment in Greece has increased since the beginning of the crisis. In 2009, the total unemployment was 9.6% climbing at 25.9% in 2012 (EL.STAT, 2012) with a larger increase in female unemployment reaching to 29%, in 2012, compared to 25,4% for men.

Figure 1a. Total unemployment in Greece, FYROM, Turkey and Bulgaria between 2005 – 2013

Source: OECD Stats (data extracted: March 2015) Figure a. OECD Stats (data extracted: March 2015).

Figure 1b. Female unemployment in Greece, FYROM, Turkey and Bulgaria between 2005-2012

Source: OECD Stats (data extracted: March 2015)

The higher concentration of women in the service industry (79.1% against 35.6% in the last quarter of 2008) and the deterioration of the contraction of services' employment after the implementation of austerity policies in Greece, has increased the vulnerability of women to the effects of the ongoing crisis (Karamanessi, 2012).

Similarly in the secondary sector, and although men have represented 70-73% of all employed in manufacturing industries since the mid 70s, during the current financial crisis female participation decreased more than male in this sector due to the fact that the recession affected disproportionately the female dominated manufacturing industries

(textiles, clothing, etc) (Karamanessi, 2012). It has been pointed out that in women employed in “male dominated sectors” are often the first to be dismissed (Hogarth et al, 2009).

This difference can be attributed to the fact that gender norms and the labour market forces in Greece have protected the “primary” male earner– breadwinner at the expense of grown up children and wives (Matsaganis and Leventi, 2011).

The data presented in Fig. 2. indicate that in Greece, during the period 2000-2012, as the GDP per capita decreased female unemployment actually increased. A regression between GDP per capita calculated in US dollars indicates that a reduction of less than 10% of the national GDP per capita in Greece corresponds to – at least - doubling the female unemployment rate.

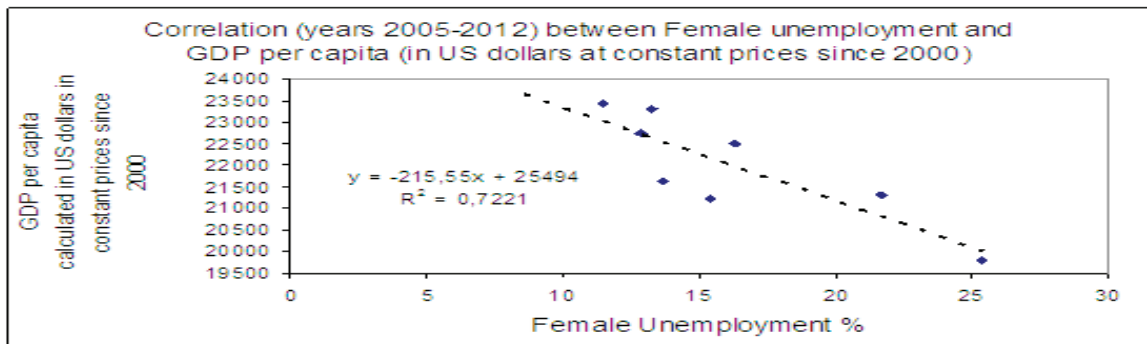


Figure 2. Correlation between female unemployment and GDP per capita in Greece for the period between 2005 and 2012.
 Source: OECD Stats, March 2014; World Bank, 2011.

In Figure 3, the log of Gross domestic product based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) valuation of Greek GDP is plotted against the log of female and male unemployment rate over a period of ten years.

There is a significant correlation between GDP and unemployment rate for both men and women. Apparently, when unemployment rises, both male and female workers face the consequences, nevertheless, women face higher unemployment rate in both good and bad times, irrespective of the GDP changes.

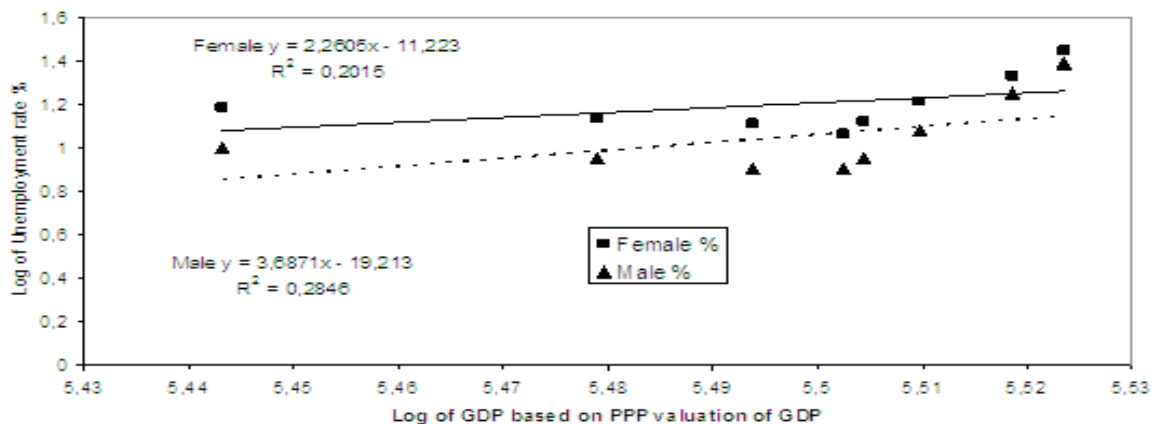


Figure 3. Log of GDP based on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) valuation of Greek GDP plotted against Log of male and female unemployment. Data: extracted on March 2014 from IMF (2014) and OECD Stats Databases.

The slight decrease of gender gaps in employment, wages and working conditions in Greece over the last years does not reflect a real progress in gender equality at work but instead it has been attributed on the lower employment rates, the higher unemployment and the reduced earnings of both male and female workforce (Tsiganou, 2014).

In periods of crises “everybody loses” and in countries like Greece and Ireland that have undergone recessions, austerity, major fiscal consolidation, long term wage and benefit cuts had a disproportionate impact on women and the gender gap (Antonopoulos, 1999; Tsiganou, 2014).

In a study at other countries like Germany, UK, Denmark and Slovakia, it was found that male employment was hit first by the crisis but was soon *reversed* as economic sectors with more female employees were affected negatively after a few years into the global financial crisis (Leschke and Jepsen, 2012).

As a result, female job losses were higher, reviving and/or reinforcing traditional *norms* on *gender roles* and the key role of men and primal breadwinners and as such “legitimate” job holders (Seguino, 2009; Smith, 2009; Leithbridge, 2012).

On top of that, it must be taken into consideration that employment figures in Greece involve registered employment, without including the informal and family economy (Tsaliki, 2000).

3. Conclusion

The decline in Greek well-being since the beginning of the crisis has been the most rapid in Europe (Bell and Blanchflower, 2015). Household real disposable income dropped around 30% between 2009 and 2012 (Koutsogeorgopoulou et al, 2014).

Under economic crises and austerity, gender inequalities persist and new forms of discrimination may emerge (Tsiganou, 2014).

Unfortunately, Greece was not effectively prepared for the social impact of the crisis. In 2009, there was poor public administration, social spending was low (4¼ per cent of GDP - excluding pensions and health), social transfers (other than pensions) reduced relative poverty by only 3 percentage points in the period between 2005 to 2009, compared to around 9 percentage points in the euro area, while other social benefits, such as family allowances, were not correctly targeted and benefitted all -rich and poor alike with only 50% of beneficiaries belonging to the poorest 30% of the population, while there was no *means-tested* minimum income support for those in real need (OECD, 2013; Leventi et al, 2013; Koutsogeorgopoulou et al, 2014).

Moreover, public social expenditure declined by almost 2½ per cent of GDP over the period 2011-13, in contrast to other southern European countries, where expenditure was increased (Koutsogeorgopoulou et al, 2014).

Female labour force participation remains lower than male participation, women account for most unpaid work, they are overrepresented in the informal sector and among the poor, face significant wage differentials compared to their male colleagues while female representation in senior public and private sector positions and entrepreneurship remains low (Elborgh-Woytek et al, 2013; Anastasiou and Siassiakos, 2014).

Although female employment has risen significantly over the last decades, the country still has one of the largest gender gaps in the European Union regarding labour market participation, unemployment and wages (Kabouri, 2013).

Male employment has in general been more hit than female employment especially at the beginning of the crisis in Greece, the spread of the recession to public services reversed the long term trend of increase in the country's female employment rate (Karamessini, 2012).

Progress in reducing the gender pay gap is very slow in Europe and although it has been declining over the last decades it has been stalled after the '90s (Harkness, 2005; Tijdens and Van Klaveren, 2012).

Internationally, the crisis has also effected others aspects of working conditions such as increased stress at work, increase in stress related illnesses, such as heart attacks, increase in the number of serious work accidents, increasing intensity at work especially in cases that have instigated massive layoffs, harassment and bullying (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2012).

The data reviewed in the present work indicate that women in Greece are paid less and are exposed to higher unemployment than men before and after the financial and economic crisis.

It can be assumed that under these conditions the priorities of women is to get any job they can get something that is not the best for a real gender equality narrowing at work, “missing” the real benefits of closing the gender pay gap; creating a fairer society, reducing levels of poverty and increasing female earnings, utilizing the best and more talented, creating a positive work environment and quality jobs.

Since *gender equality* is vital in achieving employment growth, competitiveness and economic recovery, it is vital that is not undermined as cuts are made across the labour market internationally (European Commission, 2013a).

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